**“My child could have painted that.” Really?**

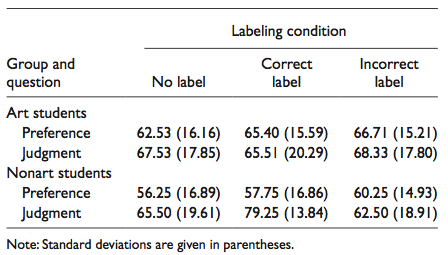


People occasionally look at paint splattered on a canvas in a gallery and say, "My child could have painted that." (Or, among eccentric pet-owners, "My monkey could have painted that.") How much better is abstract art than work by kids and monkeys? New research reveals the answer.

Take a look at the two images in this post. Which do you prefer? Which do you think is by a professional artist? (See the answer below.) For a paper published in Psychological Science, Angelina Hawley-Dolan and Ellen Winner of Boston College collected 72 undergrads, 32 of which were studio-art majors, and showed them 30 paintings by abstract expressionists. Each painting was paired with a painting by a child, a monkey, a chimpanzee, a gorilla, or an elephant. The images were matched on superficial attributes such as color, line quality, and brushstroke, and subjects were asked which piece they personally liked more, and which they thought was a better work of art.

The first 10 pairs were unlabelled (signatures were scrubbed with Photoshop). Among the last 20 pairs, half were labelled correctly and half were labelled incorrectly (such that, say, a de Kooning was called a Koko and vice versa).

How did the students do? In all conditions, both art students and psychology students chose the professional works as more preferred and of better quality most of the time. (See the attached chart.) And preferences were pretty immune to labels.



Labels did manage to sway judgments of quality, at least among psychology students. While art students gave the same ratings to professional works no matter the condition, psychology students gave higher judgments of quality to pros when correctly labeled than when unlabelled or incorrectly labelled. (79% vs 66% and 63%, respectively.)

So it seems evident that, most likely, your child could not have painted that.

If you're looking for a cynical take on the art world, however, here's your fodder: Even the art students preferred the child's or animal's painting over the professional's-and judged it to be objectively better-30 to 40 percent of the time. And that's even when they were labeled correctly.

The next time you try to make a buck passing your progeny's paintings off as masterpieces, remember this: You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, and art students about a third of the time.

UPDATE: When asked why they chose one work over the other, participants made more references to the painter's intentions in their descriptions of the professional works than in their descriptions of the amateur efforts. “This finding shows that we can see the mind behind the art,” Hawley-Dolan wrote me in an email. “We see more than we think we do when we look at abstract art.”

ANSWER: The painting on the left was by a 4-year-old named Jack Pezanosky. The one on the right is Laburnum Hans Hoffman.

**People Can Distinguish Abstract Expressionist Paintings From Highly Similar Paintings by Children, Chimps, Monkeys, and Elephants**

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*Abstract*

Museumgoers often scoff that costly abstract expressionist paintings could have been made by a child and have mistaken paintings by chimpanzees for professional art. To test whether people really conflate paintings by professionals with paintings by children and animals, we showed art and non-art students paired images, one by an abstract expressionist and one by a child or animal, and asked which they liked more and which they judged as better. The first set of pairs was presented without labels; the second set had labels (e.g., “artist,” “child”) that were either correct or reversed. Participants preferred professional paintings and judged them as better than the nonprofessional paintings even when the labels were reversed. Art students preferred professional works more often than did nonart students, but the two groups’ judgments did not differ. Participants in both groups were more likely to justify their selections of professional than of nonprofessional works in terms of artists’ intentions. The world of abstract art is more accessible than people realize.